

College-School Dialogue and Mentoring in Teacher Training Programmes in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Globally, mentoring has been recognized as one of the effective approaches in professional training and development of teachers. Most importantly, in Zimbabwe, mentoring has been largely adopted as one of the Teaching Practice strategies by teacher training colleges and schools. Good quality mentoring in schools makes an important contribution to developing professional skills especially to the student teachers (mentees) as this will ultimately ensure good quality learning experiences of learners. The purpose of this study was to establish the extent to which effective dialogue between colleges and primary schools can enhance effectiveness of the mentoring strategies in training teachers on teaching practice. Interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions were adopted in this study to establish the importance of dialogue between colleges and schools in strengthening the effectiveness of mentoring as a training strategy. The study concluded that lack of mutual sharing of ideas, skills, knowledge and information on mentoring between training colleges and schools have a negative impact on the quality of graduate teacher. The study recommends the development of communication strategies that break the barriers between colleges and schools so as to enhance the effectiveness of the mentoring approach.

Keywords: dialogue, development, mentoring, teacher training, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction and Background

Globally, mentoring is not considered as a new phenomenon but recently acknowledged as one of the most effective ways of developing people's knowledge in real contexts. What might be new could be the mode of implementation adopted by a particular country during a particular era. Whichever model used, the universal goal is that mentors (experienced, knowledgeable persons) assist mentees (novice, inexperienced) in developing into acceptable, relevant practitioners in any field.

Various models of mentoring include school-based, peer mentoring, group mentoring or one to one mentoring. The Zimbabwean teacher education system adopted the school-based mentoring in training both primary and secondary school teachers to replace the long established Zimbabwe Intergrated National Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC) and conventional four year programme that stipulated that student teachers are allocated a class under their sole responsibility with the head or deputy head playing a mentoring role. The 2-5-2 mode of training primary student teachers stipulates that students spend the first two residential terms in college; the next five terms in schools on teaching practice then the last two in college and thus their last residential final phase. During the teaching practice phase, the school based mentors are accountable for the student teachers' learning. Mentors are expected to practically and professionally develop student teachers in collaboration with both the training college and the University of Zimbabwe, particularly the department of Teacher Education (DTE) that is responsible for teacher training (Tomlison, 1995; Kasowe, 2013). Chiromo (1999) states that in Zimbabwe, school-based mentoring where a student is attached to a qualified teacher started in 1995. The mode of training specifies that during the teaching practice phase, student teachers are no longer in charge of a class as it used to be but attached to an experienced teacher as a mentor in schools (Policy No. 1 of 2002). Student teachers are exposed to real teaching to avoid theorizing ideas (Kasowe, 2013). The objective of attaching students allows them to observe the mentor teaching, while mentors would advise student teachers on matters relating to their professional development. In this training process, mentors are expected to work as partners with college tutors or lecturers (Hagger, Burn, & McIntyre, 1994). Supporting the idea, Chakanyuka (1998) goes beyond immediate

circles of partnership and suggest that stakeholders need to work together closely. Thus, the model is expected to take a collaborative character.

Different lenses are used in determining the meaning of “mentoring”. Mentoring is viewed as a developmental partnership through which one person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspectives to foster the personal growth of someone else (Sandura & Williams, 2002; Chakanyuka, 2006; Wright-Harp & Cole, n.d.). Definitions that stem from different contexts whether African or Western, bear common aspects, primarily nurturing potential for the whole person, widening skills base and competencies and building wisdom and ability to apply skills, knowledge and experience to new situations.

Zimbabwe teacher training school-based mentoring sought to achieve a variety of objectives that include;

- Exposing student teachers to the art of teaching through linking theory learnt in colleges to practice in primary schools.
- Developing teachers with relevant pedagogical skills and prepare student teachers professionally, academically and socially.

In pursuant of the foregoing objectives, mentors are to take the responsibility of ensuring the continued high levels of professionalism that teaching demands and develop an understanding of how students learn to teach and enter the debate about the forms of professionalism that effective teaching and processes demands (Furlong, Whitty, Barret, Barton, & Miles, 1994). In developed countries, school-based mentoring provides colleges an opportunity to participate in selecting suitable schools as attachment is not done to every or any school (Smith & West, 1993). In the Zimbabwean context, colleges only make a choice of provinces where student teachers would be deployed although the students have to identify the schools. In most cases, students hunt for schools that are convenient for them in terms of social life at the expense of academic life. This situation could be attributed to the meagre government stipend students get during the practicum phase. Often, students forcibly settle themselves in areas where cost of living is not very expensive. In most cases, such schools are academically impoverished. There is stiff competition for good urban schools between colleges. Schools that are known to be good, students compete for placement. The challenge is that such schools would not have the capacity to absorb the large numbers of students on teaching practice.

In urban or peri-urban areas, a single school at times may be host to students from more than one college. Each college having its own demands and expectations, teaching practice supervision styles, and as a result schools experience some challenges as there is no universal way of mentoring students. In some situations high demand for placement in a school forces school heads to end up attaching students to some teachers who are neither experienced nor very competent. Such practice makes communication between colleges and schools an inevitable and indispensable component for the implementation of a meaningful, and effective school-based mentoring.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

School-based mentoring model that has been adopted in the training of teachers in Zimbabwe has been acknowledged as an effective strategy in most contexts elsewhere in the world but what is yet to be established is the degree of interface between colleges and schools. Despite these school efforts in assisting the nurturing of student teachers professionally, it appears that there is some knowledge gap existing between the training colleges and mentoring schools. Processes of preparing and sustaining effective learning of mentees are not being communicated fully to schools. Colleges are not effectively communicating with the schools specifically the mentors on mentoring roles, supervisory skills, college and the qualification awarding board expectations. Existing literature on mentoring in the Zimbabwean context reveals lack of systematic inquiry on the role of such communication for effective mentoring. This study attempts to fill that gap.

1.2 Purpose and Importance of Study

This study sought to establish the extent to which communication between teachers’ colleges and mentoring schools can enhance the effectiveness of school-based mentoring as a training strategy for student teachers in primary schools. The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- Identify the communication strategies employed by training colleges and mentoring schools in implementing school-based mentoring programmes.
- Evaluate the impact of communication on the performance of the school-based mentoring.
- Describe the challenges confronting colleges and schools involved in the programmes.
- Suggest ways of improving the communication processes between schools and training colleges.

Results from this study are hoped to inform the mentoring schools and teacher training colleges on how both can utilize communication as a tool to improve school-based mentoring. The government would also be made aware of the strategies that can be implemented to ease the existing training challenges between mentoring school and training colleges. Study findings would also contribute to the existing literature as it appears that most studies focussed much on challenges, perceptions, mentoring roles and preparedness of mentoring personnel.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Dialoguing Models

According to Watkins and Whalley (1993) communication is needed at many levels and at various times during mentoring, as it is the process of imparting or interchanging ideas, thoughts, opinions or information by speech, writing or signs. Those involved in the communication need to clarify what is communicated, to whom, when and then plan a method and means for various occasions as people communicate different needs at different occasions. As a result, various communication models are employed when people communicate in different contexts for different purposes. The study that was carried out by Mennecke (n.d.) showed that the linear model where communication has the top-down structure, has little benefit mostly for viable organisations whilst the interactive model which could be in the form of conferences, seminars, debates, workshops greatly impact on people's knowledge expansion. Stakeholders have room to share ideas, experiences, challenges, knowledge and could work together in finding solutions to confronting challenges.

2.2 Purpose of Dialoguing

Mentoring is considered a benefiting learning process for the mentee, mentor, practicum school and training college. Identified stakeholders benefit in one way or the other. It is believed that the training colleges are a rich resource of the theory, whilst the school offers much on practice (Mutemeri & Tirivanhu, 2004). Merging these quad loose ends would strengthen the skills, knowledge base of the beneficiaries of the programme. Merging of knowledge justifies the need for continual communication between these two different knowledge bases, the school and the training college. As McIntyre, Hagger and Wilkin (1993) argue that there are no experts on how to do the job of mentoring students in initial teacher education. In order to minimize confusion and disparities, beneficiaries have to share ideas, knowledge and skills so that the education system produces competent, efficient and knowledgeable products.

General trend acknowledges mentoring as an effective approach but with reduced levels of success because of mentors not knowing their roles (Kasowe, 2013; Maphosa & Ndamba, 2012; Makura & Zireva, 2013; Mudzielwana & Maphosa, 2014). Different researches were carried out in Zimbabwe especially to assess the preparedness of mentors, understanding of mentoring and challenges associated with mentoring. In a way such studies paved way for meaningful communication between colleges and schools because colleges need to know the quality of mentors who offer a hand in training their students. For this reason the studies suggested that colleges should improve on partnership with schools. Where strong partnership exists, colleges' expectations and standards would be effectively communicated to the schools particularly the mentors. Sutherland, Scanlon and Sperring (2005) observed that improved partnership improves quality of training. Mutemeri and Tirivanhu (2014) on the same note concluded that, where there is no collaboration between schools, colleges and awarding universities, mentoring is not helpful in assisting student teachers.

2.3 Dialoguing Strategies

Colleges need to communicate with schools through offering training workshops to enhance the quality of mentoring. Studies conducted by Ngara and Ngwarai (2012), Allen (2011), Mudzielwana and Maphosa (2014), Maphosa and Ndamba (2012), Mutemeri and Ngwarai (2014), although they were conducted in different contexts concur that through work shopping, mentors would know their roles in the mentoring programme. The studies suggest that workshops would be used as the communication strategy to convey to the mentors the information that enlightens them to know their expected roles in order for them to offer quality training through mentoring. Justifying the need for workshops, Furlong and John (1993) and McIntyre et al. (1993) had earlier argued that mentors in schools did not know how to do the job because it was not only a demanding role but also quite different from what mentors had experienced before. They further stressed that there were no experts on how to do the job hence need for work-shopping each other.

Mentoring is a process that involves supervisory roles; as such, mentors are expected to possess such skills. McIntyre and Hagger (1993) argue that mentors are expected to have supervisory skills so that they would be in a position to analyze, examine, reflect on practice, situations, problems, mistakes, successes to learning opportunities and gaps implying that they need to be well read (Maynard, 1996). Orland-Barak and Hasin (2001),

Edwards and Collison (1996) also observed that mentors need to have updated theoretical knowledge. As Bvukuvhani, Zezekwa and Sanzuma (2011) argue, theory informs practice and practice modifies theory. For mentors to possess the most needed knowledge and skills, they need to be involved in continuous improvement programmes (Hollingsworth in Fullan, 1991). When colleges offer such programmes to school teachers that can be considered as a mode of communication that is called for in order to have effective relevant mentoring. Mutemeri and Tirivanhu (2014) had same observation in their study on preparedness of mentors that training workshops would create a platform for dialogue for the lecturers and the schools to share expectations. Colleges would train the mentors pitching their content on the real college standards to minimize disparities in advising or guiding students on training. Improvement programmes or the workshops would ensure greater uniformity of experience for students (Mutemeri & Tirivanhu, 2014). It has been observed that their competencies would be measured through the performance levels of their products or student teachers under their mentorship.

2.4 Challenges Encountered

Although teachers take the active role in the development of teaching skills; operations are guided by the requirements and specifics of the training college. Ngara and Ngwarai (2012) discovered that colleges are not communicating fully with the schools and mentors. Study that was carried out by Chiromo (2007) buttress the discoveries as he also realized that students were not fully benefiting from school-based mentoring as it was badly done with colleges and schools focusing on different issues. As a result, mentors and colleges do not speak the same language resulting in both the students and mentors confused (Makura & Zireva, 2013). Such findings highlight the need for communication between colleges and schools.

In the study that was conducted at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe (Mutemeri & Tirivanhu 2014), it was expressed that though training mentors was a noble move it was equally expensive for colleges. If colleges are financially constrained, they can resort to the use of circulars, student handbooks, newsletters, portfolios or make use of modern technology using things such as videos even CDs to keep the schools updated and informed. Mountford (1993) caution that, even if colleges pass on circulars, there is need to follow up on mentoring circulars as some are never read or referred to resulting in fragmented communication. Mutemeri and Tirivanhu (2014) suggest the use of school-based cluster model as a control measure and assurance of interactional communication. In this model, colleges provide training to school mentors in clusters. Justifying the advantages of using the model, the same study highlighted that the method is cost-effective as lecturers would reach big numbers of mentors on limited transport and accommodation costs. The most striking advantage is the existence of dialoguing which strengthens school-based mentoring as policies, standards, practices and challenges would be discussed on in real contexts. Furlong et al. (1988) distinguished four different levels of school-based training. Level one which seems to be critical is direct practice which cannot be left to chance. They argue that, it is only the teachers who have access to that level of knowledge. It is them who know about particular children working on a particular curriculum in a particular school. When lecturers visit they give generalized advice. That justifies the need for partnership and regular continuous communication between training colleges and schools to minimize much reliance on generalised advice. Both systems need to really know each other, practice good communication which is believed to be the the issue of greatest concern for student benefit.

3. Methodology

Research objectives usually determine the research design to be adopted in a study. For this particular study, the qualitative research design was adopted as the researcher wanted to acquire the views of participants on whether dialoguing could enhance the school-based mentoring in training student teachers in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, detailed explanation of the dialoguing practice currently existing in those systems needed to be given and justified hence the need for a qualitative design and interpretive paradigm.

The study had a sample of forty participants from three schools and one teacher training college who were purposively selected on the basis of their roles. Ten participants were selected from each category of mentees, mentors, school heads and college lecturers. Schools and the college were conveniently selected as those in accessible environments were selected to minimize costs. Gender issue was put into consideration but the study failed to strike a balance resulting in many females participating in the study. It was also discovered in this research that most mentors were female teachers while school heads were mostly males. Data was collected using a combination of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, lived experiences and document analysis.

The study was also ethically informed. Participation was on voluntary basis and consent forms were completed before participating in the study. Permission was granted before entering the schools. Information does not bear names of participants or institutions to maintain the issue of confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Results and Discussion

Presented findings were drawn from the completed questionnaires, individual interviews and focus group discussions which were carried out as planned. Both the questionnaires and interview guide had different questions crafted basing on participants' roles however all focussing on dialogue issue. The findings in this study suggest that dialogue do exist between the university, college and schools however with variations.

4.1 College and School Practices and Cultures

Participants agreed that colleges and schools are operating as separate entities in terms of knowing own cultures and practices. The systems are dominated by the individualistic approach such that neither the schools nor colleges can claim that they know the culture of each other. All the lecturers confirmed that they prepared students for mentoring before leaving the college for teaching practice in different schools with different or even contrasting cultures. For the preparation to be relevant, McIntyre, Hagger and Wilkin (1993) posit that colleges have to know the cultures and practices of the schools so that they would prepare student teachers to go and fit effectively. If colleges just generalise their preparatory process banking on bookish knowledge, then it would not benefit the students much. They may receive knowledge, skills and values that are at odds with the lived cultural experiences in schools they would be on attachment and students would waste time trying to adapt to the new environments. In some cases, the study discovered that the host or mentoring schools have been reduced to battle grounds for conflicting practices and cultures especially in cases where the schools were hosts to student teachers from different colleges. The challenge is further deepened by the fact that the schools and colleges are guided and governed by policies from different ministries; the colleges under Higher and Tertiary then schools, the Ministry of Primary Education. Mountford (1993) and Allen (2002), also argue that not all schools are capable of mentoring students and as a result they need to be carefully chosen with the help of education officials. In practice, careful selection would suffice in situations where the colleges dialogue with the schools on regular basis. In Zimbabwe even if the selection of schools is done by the students, the colleges approve the placement.

Knowledge of schools requires having an idea of the school's performance track-record and both staff qualifications and competency. Such information would be used as a selection tool between schools that qualify to mentor students and those to be excluded. If the colleges really know the schools it would be easier for the college to advise students not to attach themselves to schools of bad reputation hence making mentoring more effective and helpful. Students would be allowed to get into schools that are supportive, that exhibit reasonable learning culture aiming to achieve high learning standards.

Considering mentoring to be part of training process, no college would like students to be attached to schools with the history of failure; therefore communication is critical as schools play much larger part in initial training (McIntyre et al, 1993). The ideal situation has to be reciprocal as schools need to know fully the performance of the feeding college as well. In the Zimbabwean education system, as no school is allowed to reject taking part in training students, that knowledge would guide the schools on where to pitch the mentoring given the diversified nature of the students from different colleges.

4.2 College and School Policies

Responses from mentors, school heads and lecturers confirm that for effective mentoring to be implemented, both systems need to know what really happens within each context which currently partially exists. Policies need to be standardized within school and college partnerships and communicated openly. The suggestion from the participants buttress Sampson's (1994) ideas that colleges and schools should have shared understanding and expectations. Mutemeri and Tirivanhu's (2014) study results on preparedness of mentors were also confirmed as they stated that policies need to be shared to help mentors know their roles and avoid confusing students. Mountford (1994) in support of the idea claims that knowing policies would only be possible where partners' relationship is an open and honest one. Chakanyuka (2006) observed that policies that colleges and schools used are interpreted differently resulting in students receiving conflicting advice. There is need for regular dialoguing between the parties explaining matters such as own policies, standards even assessment criteria as this adversely affected effective mentoring. If sharing of policies is done carefully, Frost (1994) claimed that, would relieve both institutions from producing para-professionals who are able to reproduce little more than what they have observed in their mentors.

4.3 College and Mentor Dialoguing

All interviewed mentors acknowledged their role as critical implementers of the school-based mentoring. This is in support of earlier studies in Zimbabwe emphasising the need for mentors to know their roles, the need to have the skills to develop efficient teaching practitioners and be competent teachers from where students can observe and learn. School heads, mentees and lecturers also indicated that mentors at times fail to help students not because they are incompetent but due to intergenerational incongruence. Mentoring is a different approach from

what most mentors received during training. Although participants acknowledge the work done by the college of rolling out workshops and seminars in different districts, they still expressed dissatisfaction as all the workshop items or activities were decided upon by the “owners of the programme”. School heads and mentors observed that this approach had a “top-down” flair and adversely affected their participation. Mentoring programme as a form of exchange or interface was not based on either mutual dependency or reciprocal causation (Burgelman, 2002).

Mentors and school heads even pointed out that at times they were involved in activities that do not address confronting challenges in mentoring. Moswela (2006) caution that for any improvement or development programme to be relevant, it should address the problems teachers are facing in schools not to address anticipated challenges. Real challenges could be known to the colleges or schools if purposeful dialoguing does exist between these systems. This has recently been reinforced by Mutemeri and Tirivanhu (2014) who noted that to enhance preparedness colleges should embark on school-based training models in order to reach out to the mentors in their real workplaces.

Lecturers and mentors described that communication between the college and schools is fragmented at the same time inconsistent. College only gets school supervision reports during the last phase of teaching practice when the college would be compiling the teaching practice marks for all students. What happens on daily basis during the other four terms is not known at college level. Mentors argued that, such a practice results in colleges getting shocking results during critical teaching practice examination moments. They expressed the need for regular dialoguing especially on students’ performance citing that that would make colleges know their real students not basing on the college supervision only that they have at times once per term which is at times done in a fly past manner because of time constraints (Yeomans & Sampson, 1994). Lecturers expressed that when they get to schools on supervision purposes, the mentors automatically become core-supervisors. Consistent with the expectations and practice of that particular college, most mentors feel challenged to take up the supervision roles. When it comes to conferencing that is done after the lesson observation between the mentee, mentor and lecturer, most beneficial dialoguing in most cases mentors would take a very passive role of just listening to the lecturer’s comments instead of giving feedback as well. When asked to justify such stance, mentors expressed the fear of passing on conflicting comments as some were never exposed to the standardization process or supervision criteria. The foregoing discussion, unfolds that dialoguing is inevitable as it has been found to be an effective way of empowering stakeholders involved in the mentoring programme. As illustrated in Figure 1, there are various patterns and formations of dialoguing experienced between university, college and mentoring school. The diagram shows the school as the weakest link in the matrix.

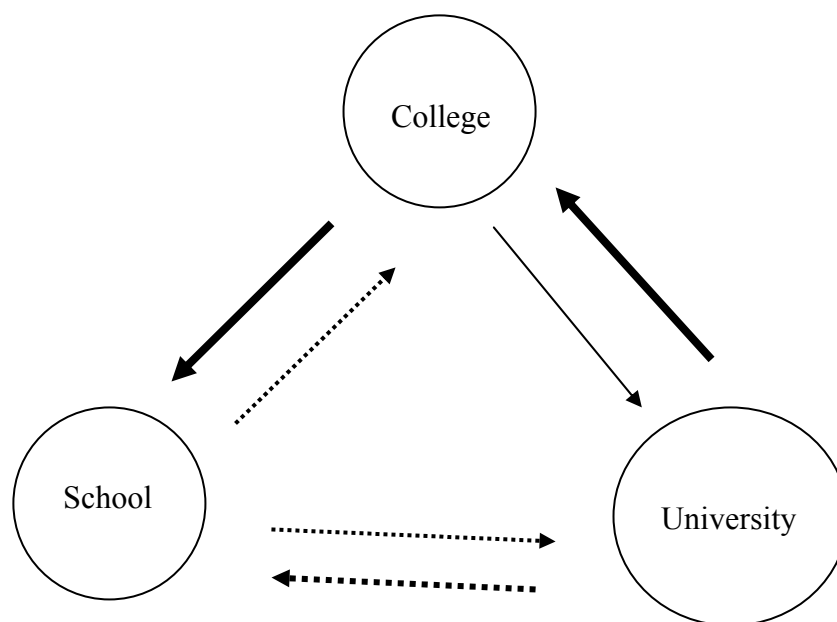


Figure 1. Dialoguing patterns

Source: author’s own modification

4.4 Dialoguing Challenges

The study cited a number of challenges associated with the communication between colleges and schools performing mentoring roles. Both systems stated that mentoring requires a widened financial base and that concurs with Mutemeri and Tirivanhu (2014) study findings. The college made reference to some of the workshops they rolled out in different districts and indicated that both the facilitators and participants needed financial assistance for their travel and food. For that reason, the workshops have been reduced to irregular interactions as financial commitment is a critical piece of the mentoring puzzle that determines the quality and effectiveness of the mentoring programme.

On the other end, timing of the workshops is a hurdle as during the term some do not want to leave their classes or the workshop dates may collide with school timetabled crucial events. Holidays had a lot of excuses forwarded as some would be engaged in various continuous improvement programmes. That also impacted on deciding on the length of the programmes and the roles of participants. Some schools would end up sending a representative hoping him/her to cascade to other staff members. Experience has shown that in most cases schools would not spare time for that, thus impacting on effectiveness of communication.

Attitudes of some school heads have been cited as one of the impediments in effective mentoring. Some school heads are non-responsive to the communication from the college. As a result, such schools would not be in a position to meet or implement mentoring according to the college standards or expectations in turn disadvantaging student teachers under their mentorship.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Regular and well programmed knowledge-intensive dialoguing can take mentoring to greater heights. The absence of knowledge-intensive interactions or dialogue between two institutions reduces their capacity to unlock real value from the mentoring programme. Lack of communication has weakened the effectiveness of mentoring as an integrative or collaborative programme. The study findings support earlier observation elsewhere (Sherwood & Govin, 2008) that effective knowledge-transfer communication was stifled by the divergence in institution missions and cultural preparedness. Schools are results-focussed, while colleges seek more the creation and development of a future professional school teacher.

According to Furlong and Maynard (1993) mentoring must be built on a clear understanding of the learning process it is intended to support. They further claim that if mentoring is not properly done, the training would be of the “sink” or “swim” variety. One of the best ways to mitigate this is to adopt an “all stakeholder approach” in the process of knowing specific roles, regulations, practices, standards and expectations. The dialogue should not only be there but it has to be open and honest (Mountford, 1994) so that students as main clients of the process would benefit at all levels. Colleges are the responsible institutions for training students and schools are guided by their standards, policies and expectations. Colleges are urged to vary the communication models and employ strategies such as student handbook, mentoring module, CDs for example on lesson delivery or roles of mentors, videos, newsletters, video conferencing in possible environments not discarding the usual workshops, circulars and hand outs. Variations would capture users’ interests, abilities and meet various learning styles.

The study also concluded that dialoguing between colleges and primary schools should create room for mentors to know their roles, have mentoring skills and the most needed theoretical knowledge they seem to fairly possess. Mentors and schools need that knowledge to blend it with the pedagogical knowledge they possess so that schools would produce teachers that are developed in total. Thus, colleges can take a lead in training teachers the mentoring process. To make it more viable or effective, mentoring could be included among other development programmes offered in various universities or colleges (Watkins & Whalley, 1993). The ministry however should also come up with the utilisation plan so that all those who would go through the programme are given the chance to use the learnt skills and remunerated. It is recommended that “the triple helix model” in which the three increasingly interfacing spaces; colleges, schools and universities are encouraged to engage in knowledge-intensive interactions. Lastly, the findings suggest revisiting the whole mentoring package (Michael, 2008) and thus paving way for future research to evaluate the communication styles and come up with the most effective method that would keep all mentoring stakeholders informed to enhance effective school-based mentoring in the Zimbabwe context.

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